

“5 + 2 = 10,000 + 12?”

Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open the eyes of our hearts that we might see your overflowing mercy all around us. In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.

How many people do you think we could comfortably feed? We're planning a pizza party in a couple weeks; I'm guessing we may be anticipating 30 or less.

Welcome Saturday is next weekend; people are always asking me how many people comes and I'm never sure. It seems like we probably feed at least 35 to 40, and everybody at least gets seconds. How many people would start to feel overwhelming? 50? 60? 100? How many people would have to show up to make you describe it later by saying, "It felt like there were at least 5000 people there!"? And what if half of those 5000 brought their families? How far in advance would you think we should start planning?

It seems to me that the good news of this story is that it feels impossible. This is not a story for a large congregation that hosts an annual feed for their whole town, with a decoration committee, and a solid rotation of cooks, and a program committee, and a clean-up crew, all carefully coordinated with monthly and then weekly meetings. This story is for scrappy churches, those of us holding things together with a wing and a prayer. This is one of the few stories that appear in all

four gospels, and in all of them, the passages that precede this miracle are connected to John the Baptist. The version we read today from Matthew and the one in Mark are very explicit in telling us that all of this happened right after Jesus found out that John – his friend? his cousin? his colleague – had been beheaded by King Herod. And Jesus had responded by trying to get some alone time. He floated off on a boat by himself, to grieve, to process, to just breathe for a moment. It seems like he was trying to get somewhere on that boat where he could just chill on his own for a while, but instead, the boat ride itself was the only alone time he got.

By the time he rowed back to shore, the crowds had caught up with him. Perhaps he would have words later with whichever disciple had opened his trap and shared where he was heading, but maybe by the time he got there, it was okay. Because as he came ashore, Matthew tells us, he saw the crowd and “had compassion for them.” Compassion is such a powerful word. And in this context – when not just Jesus, but the whole community had lost a powerful friend and ally in John – “compassion” is a particularly evocative way to describe what happened. Because “compassion” doesn’t just mean “love,” the way we often think about it. “Compassion” more literally means to “suffer with.” Jesus came ashore, and he realized that these people were deep in their feelings and pain, just as he was. And suddenly, being alone wasn’t what he needed anymore; what he needed was to immerse himself in that suffering and alleviating it anyway he could. So he spent the

day healing, which must have been exhausting. It's no wonder by the time the sun was going down, the disciples suggested that they tell folks to move on. They were trying to care for their leader the best way they knew how. So how wild must it have seemed when he instead told them, "You give them something to eat"?

The set-up to this story is just as important as the miracle of feeding, because it makes unavoidably clear that this miracle of abundance emerges from a moment of total depletion. Not only was Jesus grieving; he had then poured himself out in a flurry of healing, perhaps in an effort to assuage his own sorrow. How could there be anything left?

My dear church, this story is for us. Today, this first Sunday of August, when we are still reeling from not one, but three recent losses, with an uncertain future looming in the background. It is so hard to imagine abundance emerging in our present context of loss and overwhelm. And that is exactly the point.

So often, we look to Jesus when we come to the table and talk about "the blessing and the breaking of the bread." But what Jesus needs us to notice here is where he was looking. He was emptied. He was hollowed out. Who knows how many of his tears had fallen into the Sea of Galilee while he was in that boat? He knew the disciples couldn't feed those 10,000 hungry people. He knew he couldn't feed those 10,000 people. The only One who can make funny math work on this scale is God. Jesus looked up to heaven. And then he gave back to the disciples what

they had given to him, and somehow, as the crowds were served, “all ate and were filled.” And not only that, but twelve baskets were needed to collect up the leftovers. (Where did those baskets even come from?!)

I don’t have a lot of need to over-explain this miracle today, though I have some theories. Because the thing we need to hear in this moment is not necessary even about food. It’s about God showing up when we turn our eyes in God’s direction in those moments of total depletion. It’s about taking the little we know we have and turning it over to Jesus, who will remind us to dedicate it to God before we do anything else with it, because that can make impossible things possible. Whether it’s a summer lunch program, or an artisanal-scale homeless ministry, or an empty lot full of trash and weeds transformed into a neighborhood blessing – we have seen this kind of miracle before. We just have to remember what we’ve seen. We just need to ask Jesus to help us direct our eyes in the right direction.

We may feel empty and worn out, a bit raw around the edges. Jesus reminds us to take our moments to catch our breath, but not to isolate ourselves for too long, because compassion heals us when we do our suffering together. Jesus reminds us that it is when we are emptied out that we are most open to becoming vessels for the Holy Spirit. Jesus reminds us that where we see “only” limited resources, God sees the seeds of abundance. Let us give thanks and trust in God’s compassion.

Hallelujah and Amen!